



Higher Education Begins with Solid Foundation

by *Eddie A. Pérez*

When Dutch Traders founded the city of Hartford in 1635, they built a fort and called it "The House of Hope." Today our schools serve as modern-day "Houses of Hope" because education provides a level playing field on which to learn, achieve and succeed. This is especially important to Hartford, Conn. — one of the poorest cities in the country. This is especially imperative to Hartford students, who continue to improve their test scores and receive national recognition for closing the achievement gap between urban and suburban school districts. This is especially crucial to Hispanic students, who make up 53 percent of Hartford's student-body population.

This brings me to a unique learning opportunity that's offered to Hartford students and their families. You see, Hartford has adopted a "Choice" system. This empowers parents and students to pick the school that best fits the child's academic challenges and interests. A unique choice is the Burns Academy of Latino Studies, nestled in one of Hartford's predominately Hispanic neighborhoods.

Students from all over the city, 548 of them, attend the Burns Academy of Latino Studies, which offers a pre-K-through-7 program that enhances the notion of being a global citizen. After only one year, this school is succeeding and proving to be a wildly popular choice — and there's a waiting list to get in. For instance, fifth-grade math scores were the second-most improved in the entire district after just one year of implementing this new vision, and more parents are more involved in more school-related activities than in prior years.

Why? Because the academy offers an innovative approach to education

that focuses on a worldview of literacy, science, social studies, art and mathematics and ensures nine years of world-language study. The curriculum, based on state educational standards and implemented under the leadership and guidance of school principal Dr. Lourdes Y. Soto, integrates a comprehensive study of cultures and world affairs that demonstrates a global outlook and prepares students for the jobs in this competitive 21st-century global society.

It is amazing how children grasp the concept of how small our world really is. They see how all the countries interconnect through culture, economics, the environment and technology. Through their daily studies, they learn the strong impact that Hispanics have on their city (which is 42 percent Hispanic) as well as other cities, countries and continents beyond their borders. They totally comprehend that Spanish is a world language and that having command of more than one language makes them more marketable in the world work force, not to mention their local job market.

The Burns Academy of Latino Studies prepares this future work force for all professions with the understanding that being at least bilingual sets them apart from others. For many of our youngsters, Spanish is already either a first or second language in a city that communicates in 65 different languages. By speaking Spanish daily in the classroom, all of the students embrace this diversity and absorb the bilingual content. By mastering at least a second language, these students will have a competitive edge when they apply for high schools, colleges and employment.

I often speak to young people about the bilingual edge in this world economy, and now we have a school here in Hartford that embraces that

vision. Being bilingual can mean the difference between you getting the job or someone else getting it. It increases the number of jobs you are eligible to do in the world job market. No longer do you have to be a globetrotter to use your language skills — they can be utilized in your own neighborhood. For centuries, Hartford has been the gateway to the New World for families. We are, in a sense, a mini-United Nations. Skills learned at the Burns Academy can pave the way for future court translators, bank professionals, mayors, U.S. Supreme Court justices, even president of the United States.

These worldview skills are intangible assets. It means more than just being able to understand what another person is saying in another language. It is having the necessary respect for and insight into a person's culture, behavior and body language. It creates a bond — a trust — that otherwise wouldn't exist between people, or in today's world, between international corporations and countries.

In my daily travels, I use both English and Spanish every day. Now Hartford Public Schools has created an academy that provides that opportunity to the next generation of students. Yes, this program right now only goes to seventh grade. But we are still in the process of building that fort — that House of Hope — and next year, the program will be extended to eighth grade. Down the road, these students will feed into a high school program that serves the same academic needs and explores the same international purpose. By promoting an advanced world-language academy, we will build upon a solid foundation and offer a unique path to higher education and beyond.

By the way, the motto "It Takes a Village to Raise a Child" applies to this school and to this educational plan of action. Without dedicated parents, teachers and community partners, the Burns Academy of Latino Studies would not be making the rapid progress that it is. The World Affairs Council of Connecticut and the University of Connecticut Institute of Puerto Rican and Latino Studies play strategic roles in instructional and character education models in order to promote student achievement.

I often say, education equals empowerment. We want to empower our young people with skills that can be reinvested in Hartford to continue our unprecedented renaissance, despite an unprecedented recession. Education is at the core of that resurgence and will help Hartford, as well as other urban areas, grow and prosper. By offering groundbreaking and forward-thinking educational opportunities like the Burns Academy of Latino Studies, we strengthen our people, our communities and our global outreach.

¡Si Se Puede! Yes we can! And yes, we will. And yes, our Founding Fathers would be proud of this "House of Hope."

Eddie A. Pérez is Hartford's first Latino mayor and its first strong mayor in more than 50 years, making him the CEO of the capital city. In December 2005, he made history again by becoming the chairman of the Board of Education for Hartford Public Schools, a position he held until February of 2009. He still serves as a board member.





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